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Slaying Blended Technology and Guile

By JOEL GREENBERG

At about 9 A.M. last Friday, a cellular phone rang in the plain cinder block dwelling where Yahya Ayyash was hiding in this warren of muddy lanes and ramshackle houses near the northern edge of the Gaza Strip.

As Mr. Ayyash, the Palestinian bomb-maker most wanted by Israel, held the phone to his ear, it exploded, shearing off part of his head and blowing off his hand. He died instantly.

New details emerging about the assassination -- widely attributed to Israel's Shin Bet security service -- reveal a combination of digital-era technological wizardry, old-fashioned human intelligence gathering and a precise ability to bring them together.

Mr. Ayyash's killers took advantage of his reliance on a cellular phone because standard phone lines are hard to get and sometimes do not work in the Gaza Strip. The mobile phones come from Israeli dealers, who market them through local agents.

The preparation of the phone itself was technological feat. It was reportedly a small, slim model that fits in a pocket. At some point it was packed with a detonator and an estimated 50 grams of high-grade explosives, nearly two ounces, yet it still functioned without raising suspicions.

Mr. Ayyash also became vulnerable through his dependence on Osama Hamad, a former college roommate and fellow member of the militant Islamic group Hamas, who sheltered the fugitive along with his wife and child in his house in Beit Lahiya.

Palestinians say that the fatal flaw in this arrangement was Mr. Hamad's link to his uncle, Kamal Hamad, who is known locally as a wealthy contractor with a history of ties to the Israeli military government that used to be in charge of Gaza.

Osama Hamad said that after he began working for his uncle four months ago, he was given a cell phone for business use. On several occasions, Mr. Hamad said, his uncle had borrowed the phone.

Last Friday, Mr. Hamad said, his uncle called him on the house phone and told him to turn on the cellular phone in expectation of a call. A half hour later, Mr. Ayyash's father tried to call his son but could not get through: apparently the attackers had blocked the normal phone line to the house.

Forced to dial the cell phone, the father called at about 9 A.M., Mr. Hamad said. Mr. Hamad answered and handed the phone to Mr. Ayyash.

"I told him that we don't want to talk on this telephone," the father recalled, referring to fears of surveillance by the Israelis. "But he said we could talk. When I told him, 'No,' again, he asked, 'How are you?' " Then the phone exploded.

Residents of the neighborhood said they heard nothing but saw an airplane circling above that had been over the area a few days before.

Israeli press and television reports said that the phone-bomb was detonated by a radio signal from the plane. The signal was sent after Mr. Ayyash was identified as the man speaking on the cellular phone, the reports said. There has been no confirmation from Israeli officials, who have not acknowledged responsibility for the killing.

Osama Hamad's uncle has since disappeared, and his family asserted today that he was in the United States, though they did not know where, helping a son living there who has been jailed for a traffic offense. The relatives denied that the uncle was connected to the killing, contending that he had left for the United States three days before the assassination. But the Palestinian Authority put out a warrant for the uncle's arrest and said it would demand that Israel hand him over. The police searched the uncle's house in Gaza today and said they had rounded up several other suspects.